LOCAL

Man remains hopeful he'll someday gain clemency

By **TRACY JOHNSON**, *P-I REPORTER*
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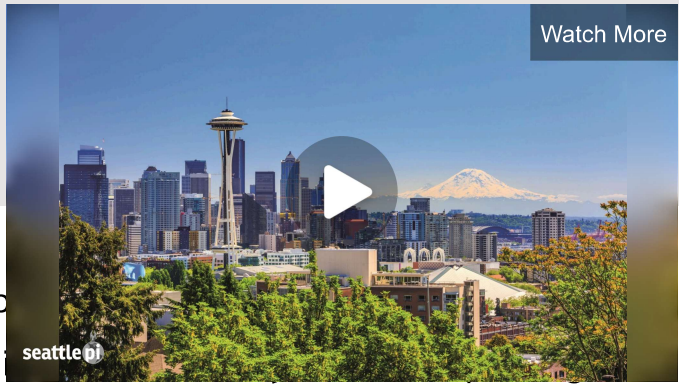
For years Gerald Hankerson, convicted for his part in the 1987 stabbing death of a Seattle man, knew he'd never see beyond the prison walls that have held him since he was a teenager.



Until suddenly, there was hope. Dozens of peop
pushing for his release. Two key witnesses aga

raising money to send him to college. Even a job was waiting.

The state clemency board unanimously agreed he should go free next year. Gov. Chris Gregoire decided otherwise but invited him to ask again in three years.

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And so now, as Hankerson plans to reapply for clemency and studies for the possibility of college, he hangs onto the hope that came from hearing a roomful of people agree that he shouldn't have to live and die behind bars.

"The food smelled different. Even the commercials on TV looked different. I thought, I might get to see this car now," he said. "My imagination came back."

Teachers, prison volunteers and community leaders say Hankerson is a sharp, well-spoken mentor to other prisoners and has put his heart into trying to show middle and high school students how to learn from his

He is one of just two men the clemency board u sentence since Gregoire took office in 2005. She inmate who had been convicted of assault -- in

Yet Hankerson knows this about clemency: It's rarely granted, it's out of his hands, and it would cause heartache for the family of Nai Vang Saeturn, 27, who lost his life outside a Central District grocery two decades ago in what King County prosecutors called a "vicious and predatory murder."

Now 38, Hankerson wants the chance to show Saeturn's mother "that I am worthy, that I am sorry."

Witnesses recant

Saeturn bought some soda pop on May 18, 1987, and was walking home when he was attacked. Seattle police eventually arrested Hankerson, then 18, and another man, Alvin Mitchell, 19.

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The strongest evidence came from Mitchell hims
acquaintance he and Hankerson followed Saetu
that he stabbed him while Hankerson beat him.

Hankerson admits he was there that night; he v
adult to buy him beer. But he said Mitchell and t

toward him, chasing an Asian man who was clutching a grocery bag.

Hankerson said he thought the man must have taken the teens' beer money and refused to give them the beer, so he grabbed him, making him stumble. He said he didn't hit the man but briefly joined the chase, then turned back for his beer.

"Later on I realized I was just as responsible for committing the crime. I did grab the guy, which led to his death," he said recently at Stafford Creek Corrections Center in Aberdeen. "I accept responsibility at every level for that."

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In the 1988 trial, two other teens who followed Saeturn from the grocery testified that they saw Hankerson help Mitchell attack him. Now, in written statements, they said police pressured them to lie.

"I remember saying at trial the things that I thou
so that they would not charge me with murder

The lead detective has denied threatening any

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Jurors questioned whether Hankerson and Mitchell committed the same crime if only one of them acted with premeditation, but they ultimately convicted both of aggravated murder. It meant both got life sentences with no chance of parole even though Hankerson had far less to do with Saeturn's death, said Hankerson's attorney, Sheryl Gordon McCloud.

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"He's not trying to escape punishment," McCloud said. "He's already done the time that would have been required for first-degree murder."

Twelve years into his prison sentence, Mitchell tied an electrical cord around his neck and hanged himself.

'Articulate teacher'

Hankerson remembers being "literally terrified" toughest prison in Walla Walla as a scrawny, 5

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"The first guy I see, his arm was as big as my waist," he said. "I didn't even have a moustache yet, and these guys had been here longer than I'd been alive."

Early on, he did what he could to prove himself. He got in fights. He landed in solitary confinement for many months at a time. He also learned his parents, who weren't around during most of his childhood, died of drug overdoses.

In 1991, he and another inmate climbed into a delivery truck and tried to escape. But gradually, he said, "the stupidity wore off and the maturity came in."

And so did his future wife -- a prison cook whom he became friends with and, after she left her job, married. He said Maurgee Merritt, who died of breast cancer two years ago, got him to see that his life was meaningless unless he turned it around.

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He joined and eventually led two major prison groups, the Concerned Lifers Organization and Black Prisoners Caucus, and other programs aimed at helping people both in and out of prison.

He earned a high school diploma, completed a business program, got a janitor's certificate and took classes in cooking, drafting and whatever else he could. He helped raise money for needy children and felt good "being part of something constructive for a change," he said.

He made a big impression talking with visiting students about peer pressure, gangs and prison life. Retired Seattle Principal Harry Finks said the teens were enthralled and called him "an amazingly eloquent, articulate teacher."

Prison volunteer Bill Korum said he spent a lot of time talking to Hankerson about life -- and later his crime -- before realizing "he was for real" and now plans to give him a job at one of his Puyallup car dealerships if he's ever freed.

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"If the governor would reconsider, it would be such a huge morale boost for other prisoners who might think, 'If I behave and do what Gerald did, I might have a shot,'" Korum said. "I wish she could just spend a day with him."

Victim's family suffers

In a small, dim South Seattle apartment, a petite, graying couple talked this week about the son they lost and how 20 years in prison is not punishment enough.

Saeturn's parents were counting on their son to help support and care for them in their old age and believe that if Hankerson can't pay financially, he should pay with a life sentence, said Saeturn's mother, Fahm Finh Saechao.

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"If he wasn't helping the other man, my son wouldn't have died," she said through an interpreter. "We suffer forever."

Saeturn's father, Yao Vang Saeturn, said he did Hankerson has really changed or is simply clain

They both remember the night: They worried when their son didn't return from the store. They went looking for him. They saw a crowd of people. They found their son dying on the street.

In a letter last year, Saechao and 21 others in the Seattle area's Laotian community urged the clemency board to keep Hankerson locked away. In his own letter, Dan Satterberg, now King County's interim prosecutor, wrote that it was "good to know that Mr. Hankerson has adjusted well in prison" but also "too soon to be considering clemency for this heinous offense."

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Nai Vang Saeturn, whose family had fled Laos seven years earlier, had been working as a janitor and studying to become a minister.

'Earned his way out'

Hankerson once thought of clemency as a "hail
chance for prisoners. On June 7, 2006, he starte

Dozens of people went to the clemency board i
Many wrote letters, including King County Coun

Hankerson "a role model for the younger prisoners." Hankerson listened to his clemency hearing on a static-filled phone line from the prison as one person after another stood to praise him.

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"I am so moved by what I have heard," said Robert Winsor, a retired judge and then-chair of the board. "He's earned his way out, as far as I'm concerned."

Hankerson was "blown away" by the 5-0 vote and remembers wanting to ask, "Could you all just say that again?'"

The board sent its recommendation to the governor. The letter from her office didn't come until March. No reasons were given.

"It stung for a while," Hankerson said, "until I realized that it would have stung someone no matter which decision she'd made.

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Gregoire declined to discuss the case this week.

Franklin Zimring, a law professor at the University of California-Berkeley, said clemency is a needed "safety valve" in cases where the only possible sentence is life without parole -- but one without legal standards, leaving governors to consider public opinion and their instincts. "Clemency has become a rare event because there are no political advantages associated with it in the overwhelming majority of cases," he said. "Ordinarily, governors have a lot more to lose than gain by an extension of mercy."

Hankerson said if he's ever granted the extraordinary measure, Saeturn's family and the many people who have stood behind him will be a constant reminder:

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"I can't afford to fail," he said.

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